TIMELINE: 1940-1949

1940

■ Orson Welles lunched at Hotel Louis Joliet on an unscheduled visit when his plane was grounded on its flight between Hollywood and New York on June 7.

1941

■ In March, the Joliet Junior College basketball team captured its fifth state title in nine years when they overwhelmed a desperate Wilson Five, 47-28, before a capacity crowd in the local gym.
■ On Dec. 7, the Japanese launched a pre-dawn attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, killing 3,000 Americans. The next day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared war on Japan.

1942

■ More than 120,000 Will County men, women and children registered for sugar ration books. Every consumer of sugar had to register for a ration stamp book.
■ Actress Carole Lombard, wife of screen idol Clark Gable, died in a plane crash on Jan. 16.

1943

■ A petition by Carl Zobel to have 1000, 1001 and 1002 Elizabeth St., immediately north of Moran Street, brought into the city limits, was approved in county court on Oct. 7.

1944

■ The Joliet High School Board of Education voted to dismiss classes when news of Germany's capitulation was received. If the news of the Nazi surrender was received after 4 p.m., classes would not be held the following day.
■ On June 6, the first of 4 million troops arrived on the beaches of Normandy to begin a bloody invasion of Europe that eventually would wear down Hitler's armies.

1945

■ The Germans surrendered on May 8; after two atomic bombs decimate Japanese cities, the Empire surrenders.
■ On Aug. 5, a severe thunderstorm, accompanied by 1.19 inches of rain, pummeled the area. Bolts of lightning knocked down the Central School chimney, caused a fire at a barn near Frankfort, placed the police department alarm board out of commission and caused a blackout for three hours in some Joliet homes.

1946

■ In June, Joliet was the first city selected for the exhibit of the U.S. Army Caravan, which was on a tour of the Midwest.

Roosevelt

1947

■ On March 2, more than 4,000

... When war bombs killed people on the homefront ...

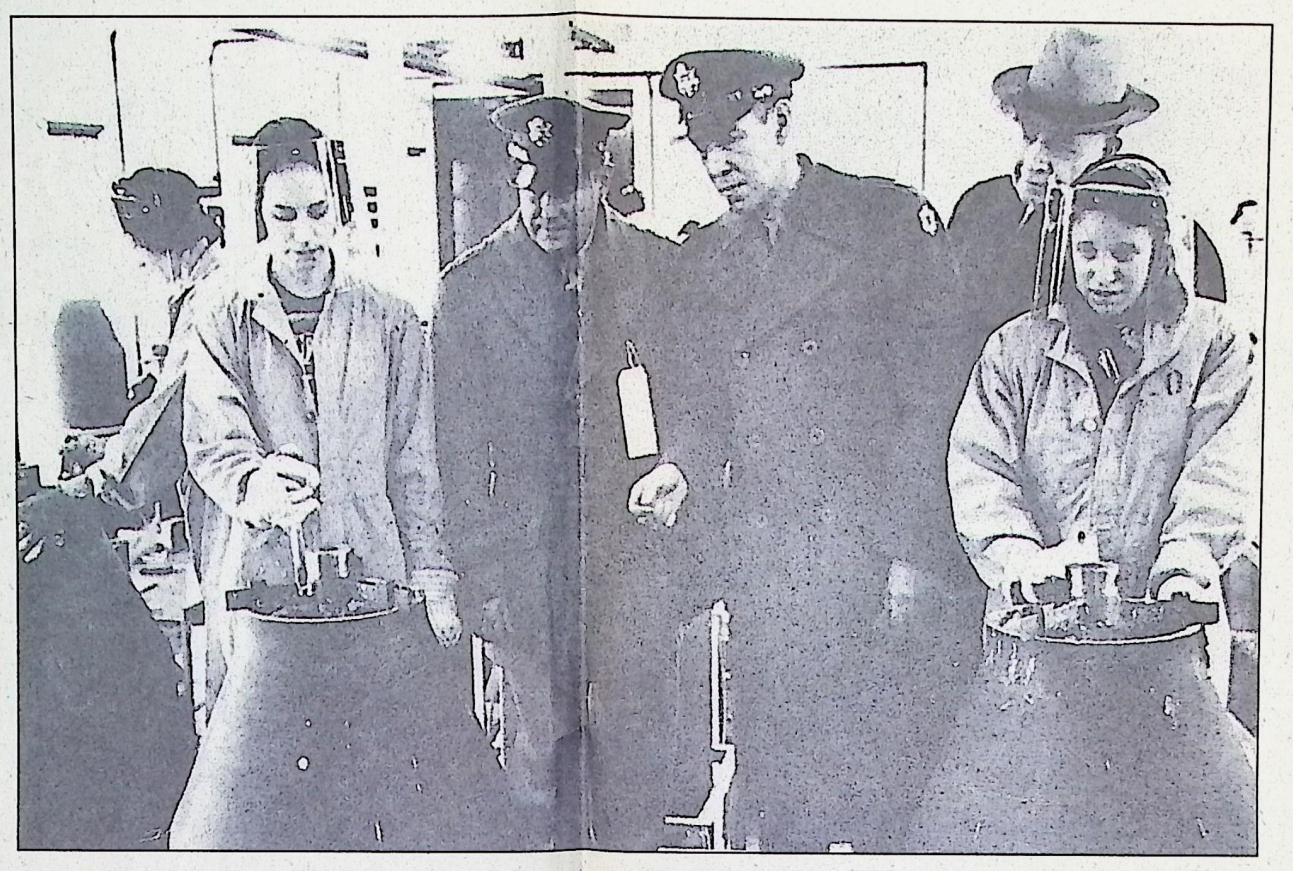

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT STERLING

These workers are storing shells in Group 64. The explosions occurred in Group 2.

Arsenal explosion's impact still felt by those who were there

BY ANNIE ALLEMAN • STAFF WRITER

Elmo Ray Younger awoke with a start in the middle of that early June night, the walls of his tiny Joliet apartment shaking.

Barely 19 at the time, he was sure an earthquake had struck Northern Illinois. Then he got the call from his employer at the Elwood Ordinance Plant.

There had been an explosion.

At 2:42 a.m. on Friday, June 5, 1942, two loud blasts rocked this area, explosions triggered by a horrible accident. Initially, 56 people were reported dead or missing, with 41 more injured. The final count was 49 dead.

The Elwood Ordinance Plant, also called the Joliet Arsenal, opened Aug. 1, 1941, and employed more than 10,000 people from all over the area. The plant produced high-explosive bombs. At one time, it was the largest operating ordinance plant in the world.

The explosion occurred in Group 2. Younger, who worked in Group 27, was told to come in, business as usual.

"When I reported for work, I was assigned to a truck to pick up the debris in Area 2," he said. He normally worked in a warehouse storage area. "When I got there, no one was allowed to go down in the area because they had the fire department, the police department, the FBI, along with many government officials there."

According to this paper's evening edition, there was plenty of damage to sift through.

"Bodies and bits of bodies arrived in bundles at the Western funeral parlors in Joliet as trucks and horses were used to carry the carnage," the paper reported. "Out of the score of bodies that was to arrive it was believed that not more than two could be identified."

All workers had to go to the bomb shelter and be thoroughly checked and identified before they were allowed to go any place, Younger said, as rumors of possible sabotage floated through the air with the smoke.

"The explosion was in building 10," he said. "Anti-tank mines were being packed five to a box, plus five fuses and boosters went in each box. They were being loaded into rail cars at the time of the explosion."

❖ *Turn to* **WAR, C2**

AREA PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS

A group of draftees gathers in front of the Grundy County Courthouse in 1941.

"Hero's price'

In February 1940, a New Lenox man put his life on the line for his wife and paid the "hero's price." William Sayres, 66, suffered serious burns on his body in his attempt to rescue his wife from the flaming kitchen of their home.

The flames followed an explosion of the gas stove in the kitchen of the frame bungalow about 5 a.m.

Homemade equipment

Joliet was not only grooming athletes, but was harvesting its very own MacGyver, the television character who could create anything out of handy items. In August 1941, Gordon McClure of 56 Herkimer St. was a lifeguard at the Joliet Country Club and a member of the Joliet Township High School swimming team.

That summer, he made his very own homemade diving equipment. He showed it off to the Herald News at the country club pool. The helmet weighed 26 pounds and was made from an old hot water tank, a tire pump and some hose. It required 56 pounds of sash weights to hold it down.

Female pilots gather

Female power abounded when delegates from nine states gathered on May 16, 1942, at Hotel Louis Joliet for the opening of the two-day convention of the North Central Section of the "99" club.

The organization was composed of women throughout the country who held private pilot licenses. This was the first time the group ever convened in Joliet. The local chapter was headed by Mrs. H.J. Adelmann.

Kids' paper drive

Joliet retail merchants, at the request of H.H. Brunings, chairman of the salvage committee of Will County, sponsored a paper salvage drive on Sept. 13, 1944. Each school child was asked to bring not less than 12 pounds of paper to school during the five days of the drive. Every child was given a ticket admitting him to one of four special motion pictures shown at the Rialto Theatre.

Purchases building